

Middle Passage Document Exercise

All of the historical quotes below describe conditions on board the slave ships. Read them and consider the discussion points at the end.

Quote 1

“The deck, that is the floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house. It is not in the power of the human imagination to picture a situation more dreadful or disgusting. Numbers of the slaves having fainted they were carried upon deck where several of them died and the rest with great difficulty were restored. It had nearly proved fatal to me also. The climate was too warm to admit the wearing of any clothing but a shirt and that I had pulled off before I went down... among them for about a quarter of an hour, I was so overcome with the heat, stench and foul air that I nearly fainted; and it was only with assistance that I could get on deck. The consequence was that I soon fell sick of the same disorder from which I did not recover for several months.”

Quote from “An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa” by Alexander Falconbridge, 1788. Falconbridge was a surgeon aboard slave ships and later the governor of a British colony for freed enslaved workers in Sierra Leone. This was an influential book in the abolitionist movement, written after Falconbridge met Thomas Clarkson. It provides a vivid account of the Middle Passage between Africa and America.

Quote 2

“If the weather is sultry, and there appears the least perspiration upon their skins, when they come upon deck, there are two men attending with cloths to rub them perfectly dry, and another to give them a little cordial. They have several meals a day; some of their own country, with the best sauces of African cookery. Afterwards they are then supplied with pipes and tobacco. They are amused with instruments of music peculiar to their country and when tired of music and dancing; they then go to games of chance.”

Evidence given by James Penny to the British Government at a parliamentary committee in 1792. Penny was a Liverpool slave ship owner and anti-abolitionist. He invested in eleven voyages of ships carrying enslaved workers from Africa to the West Indies, usually carrying up to 600 enslaved Africans in a single voyage. The street Penny Lane in Liverpool (used as a song title by the Beatles) was named after him.

Quote 3

“The truth is, that for the sake of exercise, these miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it. One slave trader I spoke to was employed to dance the men, while another person danced the women... As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears, in so much that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings.”

Quote from “Debate on Mr Wilberforce’s Resolutions respecting the Slave Trade: The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year of 1803” written by William Corbett, published 1806. This is an extract from William Wilberforce’s 1789 abolition speech. In the 1700s, unlike today, there was no official record of speeches made to Parliament. Instead, newspapers recorded their own versions of speeches and, in many cases, altered what they had heard to serve their own political agenda. So, although

most of the accounts of this speech are similar, they do differ depending on which version you read.

Quote 4

“The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. This wretched situation was...aggravated by the galling of the chains...the filth of the necessary tubs...the shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole scene of horror almost inconceivable. “One day, when we had a smooth sea, and a moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship’s crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were, in a moment, put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat to go out after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery.”

Quote from chapter two in “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African” written by Olaudah Equiano in 1789.

This chapter describes Equiano’s experiences on board a slave ship in the Middle Passage between Africa and America. This was a strongly abolitionist autobiography which became a best seller as well as furthering the anti-slavery cause. Equiano was born in Essaka, an Igbo village, in the kingdom of Benin which is now Nigeria. When he was 11 years old he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. He was transported to Barbados, and then to the English colony of Virginia. He was later purchased by a British navy officer called Henry Pascal. He eventually earned the price of his own freedom through careful trading and saving. After travelling the world as a seaman he came to London where he became involved in the movement to abolish the slave trade. As well as writing, he spoke at a large number of public meetings about the cruelty of the trade. Enslaved Africans were not usually allowed to read or write. Equiano was fortunate – he was sent to a school in London by Pascal.